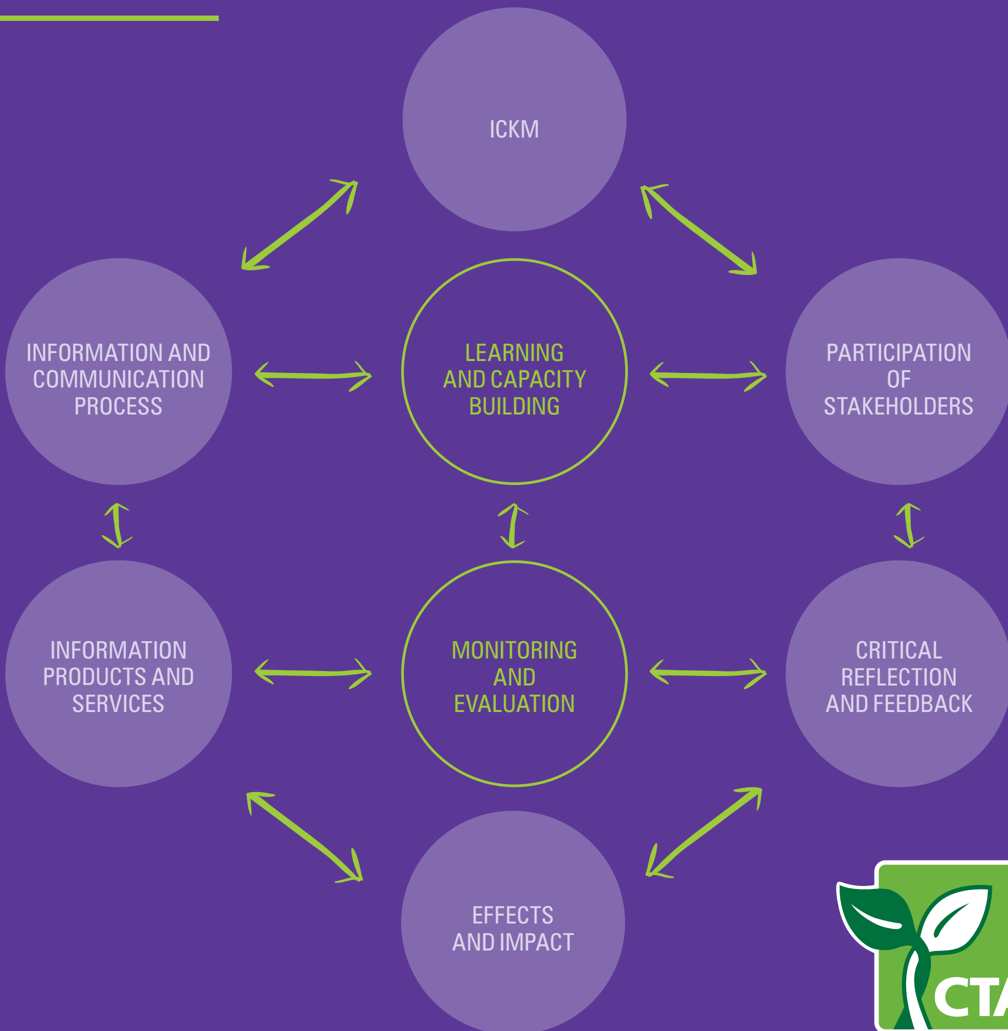
PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION OF INFORMATION PROJECTS, PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND IMPACT



CTA

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FOREWORD

In 2001, a group of information practitioners from various development agencies, led by CTA, KIT and IICD, undertook to produce a manual that would support self-evaluation by information practitioners. At their first meeting the word 'smart' was chosen to emphasise 'best practice' and as an oblique reference to the SMART indicators (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound), common in evaluation literature. And so the Smart Toolkit project was born.

The first edition of the Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services, published in 2005, was well-received by information practitioners. However, feedback from our users in the field and peer reviewers on how to improve the first edition prompted us to produce a revised and updated second edition in 2009. The French version was later published in 2010.

This book has been written largely as a result of the success of the Smart Toolkit and in response to suggestions made by stakeholders to produce a compact primer. For many, the Smart Toolkit represents a major work that, despite its simplicity, at first glance appears overwhelming and daunting to use. It is envisaged that this book will provide a short overview of the Smart Toolkit for policy- and decision-makers and managers (also known as enablers) in agricultural and rural development institutions in Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific countries, as well as act as a quick reference for users.

The publication builds on past CTA efforts to strengthen the capacities of information professionals in managing their information projects, products and services. And we believe that it will make it that much easier for enablers, who have some influence in creating a work environment conducive to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and organisational learning, to use. Key areas of focus include the importance of creating an environment within organisations where M&E and learning can take place, with a view to improving the management of information projects, products and services and exposing stakeholders to M&E practices in the field of information.

The book is timely. There is growing evidence in development literature that the rhetoric of the late 1990s and early 2000s (articulated in an OECD report in 2001) in support of using evaluation and other feedback mechanisms to promote learning has gained currency. Increasingly, evaluation efforts are not only expected to address issues of accountability, but lead to better understanding of complex environments in which development policies, programmes and organisations interact. CTA, in its quest to become a fully-fledged learning organisation, is unequivocal in its commitment to promoting M&E as a vehicle for learning among its staff and partners, in tandem with the development of a sound information, communication and knowledge management system to support organisational learning. It is therefore fitting that in preparing this book, we drew considerably on the experiences of the Centre and its partners. We have also taken into consideration the key messages in the Toolkit, as well as findings from our Smart Toolkit user's survey, and developed a working example of our e-newsletter, the Smart Toolkit News, to guide our readers.

Michael Hailu
Director, CTA

1 INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluating information projects, products and services is vital to improving the management of our activities within development institutions and improving the quality of our development work aimed at building local capacities, alleviating poverty and raising the standard of living conditions of persons across the developing world.

This document is mainly about conveying the key messages of the second edition of the *Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services*, and sharing the experiences of users. The Toolkit, as the title suggests, focuses on the evaluation of information projects, products and services from a learning perspective. It looks at evaluation within the context of the overall project cycle, from project planning and implementation to monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment, and then at the evaluation process itself, the tools involved and examples of their application.

The theme running throughout the Toolkit and this book is:

Participatory evaluation for organisational learning and impact

The emphasis is on internal evaluation – or 'self-evaluation' – rather than external evaluation. Internal evaluation contributes to organisational learning and represents a significant shift from traditional evaluation, which has tended to be donor-driven to meet the demand for accountability and compliance. If evaluation is to achieve its ultimate objectives of enhancing learning and demonstrating impact, it needs to be applied with confidence in a systematic and coherent way.

SMART TOOLKIT – BUILDING CAPACITIES, ENHANCING LEARNING

There is no doubt that the Toolkit has contributed in a major way to the limited body of literature on the evaluation of information. There has been strong demand for the publication and, at the moment of writing, well over 2,500 copies have been distributed throughout Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries since its publication in November 2009. Promotion of the Toolkit has taken the form of sensitisation and training workshops, with approximately 345 persons having benefitted to date. Although at first the emphasis was on exposing information professionals to the Toolkit, in more recent times, enablers have been included in an effort to sensitise them on the importance and benefits of creating enabling environments where M&E and organisational learning can take place. M&E is no longer the quite so feared term it once was. Increasingly, we have seen enablers and information professionals engaging in useful/constructive dialogue and there is some willingness to embrace M&E as part of the organisations' information activities.

To complement efforts to promote the Smart Toolkit, a website was created in July 2010 and the publication made available to the public in an easily downloadable format. Monitoring of the website revealed surprising results: visits to the website moved from an average of 470 per month in 2010 to roughly 1,800 visits per month during the first of half of 2012. Interaction with participants and the wider Smart Toolkit user community prompted CTA to launch its Community of Practice on LinkedIn to encourage the sharing of experiences with the wider community. To support the community further, an electronic newsletter, *Smart Toolkit News*, is currently being produced. This newsletter features articles related to M&E and serves as a vehicle to highlight the work of members of the community, their experiences and any developments taking place in relation to the promotion of the Smart Toolkit.

A point worth noting is that there have also been requests from regional organisations to strengthen the capacity of their information professionals in M&E. In response to this, CTA had a training of trainers workshop in the Pacific and another has been scheduled for the East Africa region. In addition to this, plans are also underway to produce a promotional video and invite the community to update the Toolkit by means of a wiki.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This publication aims to explain both the theory and practice of evaluation in the context of information projects, products and services. It is targeted at:

- Policy- and decision-makers and development project managers, who will be referred to from time to time as **the enablers**. This group is particularly important because of the critical role it can play in creating an environment where good M&E can take place. Furthermore, many enablers do not fully recognise the merits of organisational learning and self-evaluation and how these contribute to enhancing the performance of their organisations.
- Other people who will benefit from this publication include information practitioners in development organisations, the doers, particularly those working at national and grassroots level, who are involved in planning and managing information-related projects and generating new knowledge and key lessons from them. Many of these people would readily acknowledge that not only are they 'non-experts' in evaluation, but also that they lack the basics on how to evaluate information-related projects.

WHAT THIS BOOK CONTAINS

Key elements of the Smart Toolkit are summarised in this publication. The book offers insight into the everyday issues that development professionals face in going about their work activities and highlights the role evaluation can play in helping them manage their information projects, products and services. Accordingly, we have also included the testimonials of information professionals who have used the Toolkit to improve the way in which they manage their information activities.

Although the primary focus is on self-evaluation and learning, special attention is given to the important role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in helping organisations to function properly, and the supporting role of M&E. A basic framework is also presented on how to evaluate information projects, products and services, using the evaluation process. Boxes and tables are used to highlight key points, illustrate examples and guide the user on what exactly is required in each phase of the evaluation process. Valuable resources and links to useful websites and platforms for the sharing of experiences and the asking of questions are included at the end. For more detailed elaboration on various tools that can be used in evaluating information projects, products and services and guidelines on the evaluation of specific information products and services, we recommend reading the related chapters of the Smart Toolkit. We have also provided a quick reference on page 15 to help you on your way.

2 ENABLING ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH EVALUATING INFORMATION PROJECTS, PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

The importance of evaluation in enhancing organisational learning is widely acknowledged in development literature. Without this learning, through well-planned and implemented evaluations, organisations (e.g. national organisations, networks, etc.) are unlikely to build the capacity to respond effectively to the changing needs of their target groups. They will, in other words, have little or no impact. Peter Senge, a leading proponent of organisational learning, wrote in his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990):

Learning organisations are organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to learn together.

There are many challenges that organisations face in their bid to becoming a learning organisation. In the first place, management have to be convinced that there are gains to be had in becoming one; it also requires a change in mind-set on the part of management and staff and a willingness to change the way they interact, internally with each other and externally with their stakeholders. Enhancing the capacity of staff – and information practitioners in particular – to evaluate their products and services themselves, for learning purposes as well as for accountability, and not rely on external evaluations, will go a long way in helping the organisation on its way. Unfortunately, many lack a firm grounding in evaluation – its place in the project cycle, who to involve in its planning and implementation, how to plan it, how and when to implement it, how and when to follow it up and, above all, how to learn from it. In *Evaluating Capacity Development*, Horton et al. (2003) wrote of the benefits of project 'self-evaluation':

...people who are responsible for the organisation, management and operation and stakeholders with a strong knowledge and interest in the organisation, gain in-depth understanding of what works well and why and where improvements are needed. With this knowledge, they are extremely well prepared to address the necessary changes in practical ways.

Publications such as this one and the Smart Toolkit are aimed at helping organisations gain an insight into self-evaluation of their information projects, products and services, with a view to improving learning and, ultimately, impact.

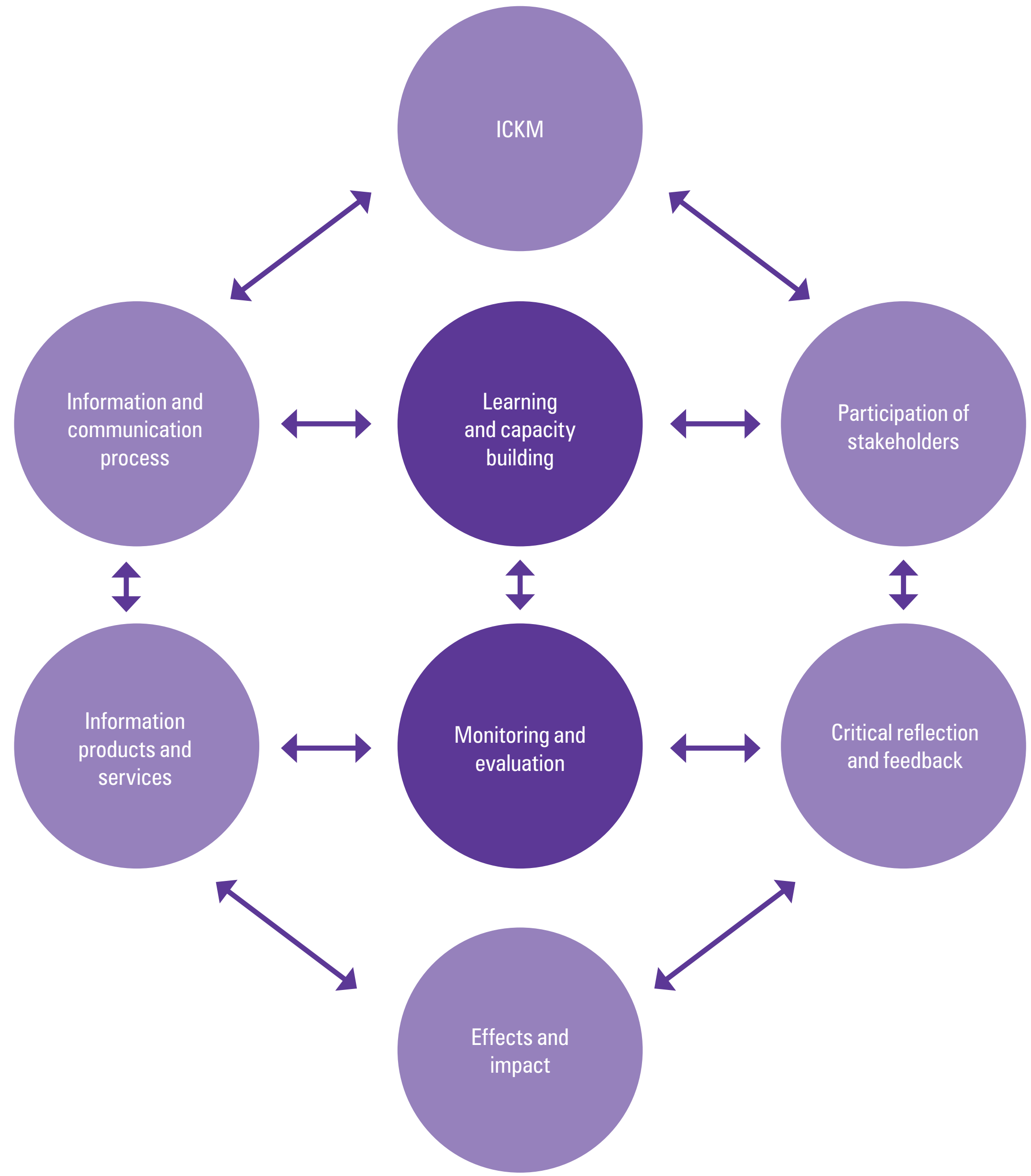
INTEGRATING LEARNING INTO AN ORGANISATION

Although M&E is key to learning, other aspects must be considered to make learning functional within an organisation. These include having:

- appropriate information, communication and knowledge management (ICKM) support. This refers to how an organisation acquires, manages and disseminates its information. See the section on the importance of ICM and KM within an organisation, for a more detailed discussion.
- strong stakeholder (i.e. staff, partners, clients, donors, etc.) participation with respect to the way information projects, products and services are developed and targeted. This includes actively involving stakeholders in the planning, management, monitoring and evaluation of your information project. Their involvement of course, should be appropriate and mutually agreed. The benefits of their involvement include an increase in:
  - sense of ownership of the project;
  - learning;
  - willingness to implement changes in the project where necessary.
- the support of a well-developed information and communication process. Careful consideration must be given to how an organisation communicates with its staff and other stakeholders. Special attention should also be paid to what is communicated and the means by which it is done.
- time for critical reflection. This means taking time to reflect on events and processes within your organisation. Asking questions such as, 'What happened? Why? What does this mean? What can we do about it?' all feed into the learning process and ultimately result in impact.

Figure 2.1 depicts the cyclical process of each aspect described above, and how they all interact and result in the improvement of an organisation's performance and impact on society. All the components of the cycle, except for ICKM, are fairly straightforward in their meaning.

Figure 2.1
Learning, M&E and supporting elements within an organisation



The elements above show how ICKM, better known as information and communication management (ICM) and knowledge management (KM), is important in organisations, and the supporting role M&E plays in the learning process.

IMPORTANCE OF ICM AND KM IN ORGANISATIONS

Information has become increasingly recognised as a critical resource for enabling development institutions to fulfil their mandate and institutional goals. Consequently, there is an almost continuous need for new (and in some instances, existing) information and knowledge in different forms. Significant resources are required to support the provision of this information, including personnel, computer hardware and software, communication technologies, and internally generated data and information in various formats, including reports, operational procedures and financial resources.

Not surprisingly, ICM and KM have become central to much of development thinking, boosted by the tremendous growth in ICTs.

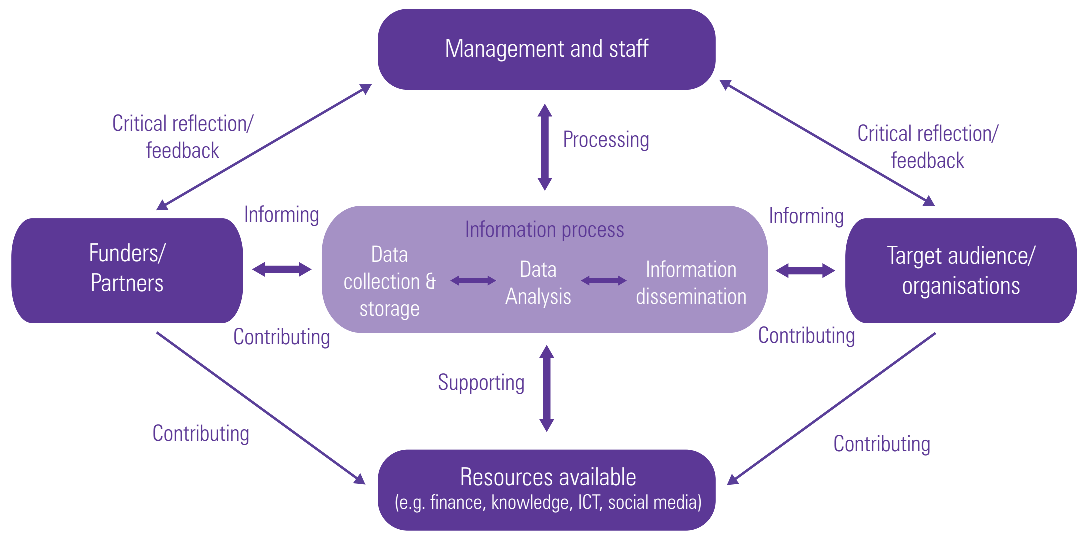
Box 2.1
ICM and KM definitions

H.M. Prosper Monde (Director in charge of M&E for Food Security at the National Food Security Office (ONASA), Benin), and user of the Toolkit describes **ICM** as "…the process by which an organisation acquires or collects **useful** information (obtained by various means, e.g., via research carried out internally and externally, from partner organisations, target groups, etc). It also involves the way in which the organisation manages its information, in terms of storage, analysis and use. How information is communicated and disseminated, the channels used and the feedback obtained from stakeholders are also important components of ICM." See Figure 2.2 below.

For one of our partners, **Joel Sam**, Director at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)-Institute for Scientific and Technological Information (INSTI) in Ghana, **KM** has to do with creating or providing an enabling environment in which individuals can share their knowledge and learn from each other in order to improve their work and the overall performance of the organisation. It also has to do with having access to the information that you need, when you actually need it. De Brun (2005) speaks about KM and by extension ICM as having three components: people, processes and technology. However, with the advent of ICTs, there is the tendency to see ICM and KM as a purely technical issue. In fact, it is the people/organisation component that is the most important, supported by appropriate processes and enabled by technology.

Given that almost all organisations rely on information for their very existence, having well-developed strategies to promote the development of well-organised and resourced ICM and KM will help them to perform better, become more efficient and competitive and maintain their relevance to their target groups. But how can you ensure that your organisation has access to the 'information you need, when you need it' to support your activities?

Figure 2.2
ICM in an organisation



SUPPORTING ROLE OF M&E

M&E can play a critical role in generating the necessary support and information organisations need to perform effectively, by way of:

- Identifying the actors and their roles and responsibilities in terms of who manages what, who is implementing, who the target groups are, and their needs.
- Determining the value base of the organisation.
- Identifying areas where management and practitioners can improve performance and accountability. This involves:
  - learning what went well and what can be improved;

- sharing of knowledge (learning) of management and staff and gaining insights so as to be able to develop new strategies where needed;
- increasing transparency of operations and activities, thereby promoting credibility/trustworthiness;
- determining where quality and operations can be improved in terms of costs and efficiency;
- increasing dialogue among staff and partners aimed at reducing conflict and fostering feelings of inclusion.

In recent years, the emphasis in the evaluation debate has shifted from output to outcome and, more recently, to impact and learning through the sharing of experiences.

Any discussion of M&E and its role in providing the 'right' information must, however, take into account the challenges that people and organisations face in their quest to harness information and knowledge fully. Key challenges (see Figure 2.3) include the need to:

• Strengthen the learning capacity of organisations. Lessons learned and best practices need to be shared in order to improve performance and avoid costly re-inventions of the wheel. Evaluation provides learning.

• Be transparent. 'Accountability' is guaranteed a slot on the agenda at most international development fora, not just 'vertical accountability', vis-à-vis policy-makers and donors, but also 'horizontal accountability' to the beneficiaries in the South and the taxpayers in donor countries. Again, there is a pivotal role here for M&E.

• Make evaluation as participatory as possible. This means involving stakeholders as much as possible so as to ensure their commitment to the results of the evaluation. According to Patton (2008) "People are more likely to use the results of evaluations if they understand and feel ownership of the evaluation process and findings; they are more likely to understand and feel ownership if they've been actively involved…"

• Take into account all existing information that the organisation uses for its activities and the ICTs used to promote communication within and without the organisation.

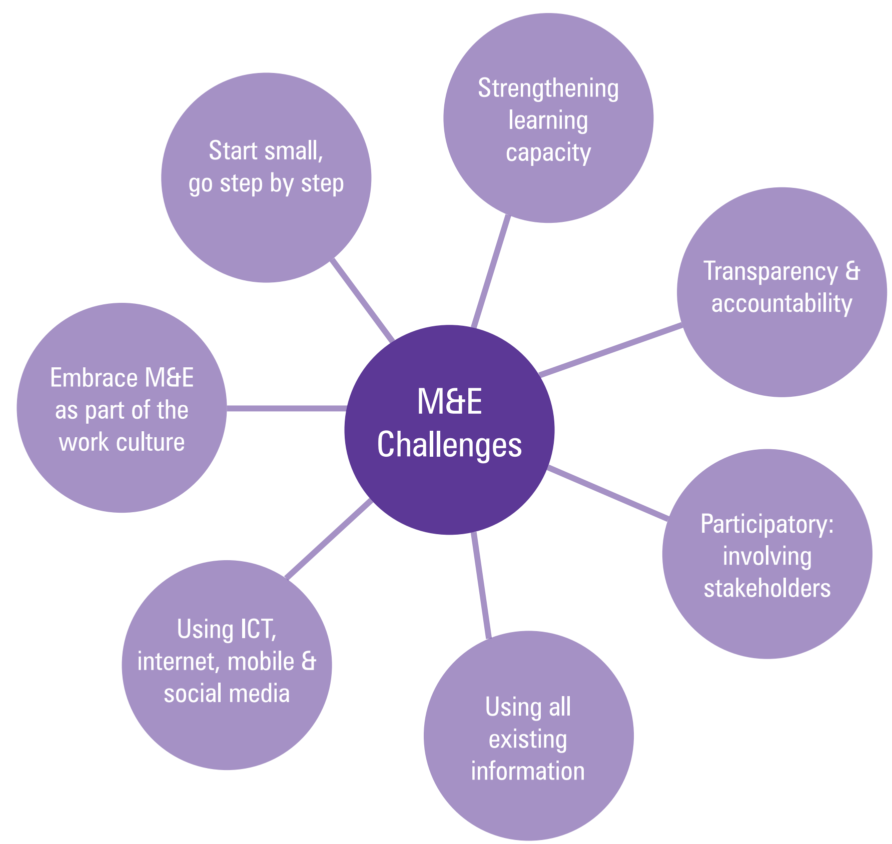
• Embrace M&E as part of the work culture and share experiences to overcome technical difficulties. Development practitioners often view M&E as 'extra work' and there is not enough appreciation of its benefits. As a consequence, not enough time is allocated to M&E activities.

• Start small, from the simple to the complicated. Too many plans go awry because they were too ambitious at the outset. It is important that at the initial stages you go step by step. Perceived complexity of the M&E process can result in a lack of support from the colleagues you need most. Sensitisation and training of staff in M&E will help your organisation move ahead.

Organisations need to rise to the above-mentioned challenges if they are serious about performing effectively and demonstrating the impact of their efforts. They need to learn from previous experiences and be participatory in their approach to learning and in determining impact. This is particularly true for information professionals in the development sector, with the ever-changing ICT environment, most notably the rise of the social media and the use of Web 2.0 tools, posing a range of new opportunities and challenges.

Information is key to M&E. Without 'good' information, neither learning nor accountability would be possible, for example. Good information, systematic monitoring and good evaluation are therefore interdependent. In recent years, the emphasis in the evaluation debate has shifted. Initially, it was on output. It later moved to outcome and, more recently, to impact, and learning through the sharing of experiences. There is a growing demand from both donors and the general public for feedback on the contribution of development activities towards improved livelihoods in developing countries. Measuring the impact of information products and services remains, however, particularly difficult.

Figure 2.3
M&E challenges faced by organisations



3 APPLYING THE SMART TOOLKIT

In this section we look at the reasons for using the Toolkit and its structure. A reference guide highlighting key sections of interest, along with suggestions as to who would be interested in reading the particular section and where to find it in the Smart Toolkit, has also been developed and can be found on page 15.

WHAT IS THE TOOLKIT FOR?

If you are new to the whole monitoring and evaluation process, the Toolkit is a good place to begin. It will give you a good overview of M&E, help you to organise your thoughts and prompt you to seek the answers to such questions as:

- Why is it important to monitor and evaluate your information project/ product/service?
- How should you go about creating an environment for monitoring, self-evaluation and learning?
- How should you go about monitoring and evaluating your information project/product/service?
- How is the information product/service performing?

- Are the right things being done?
- Why did that work?
- Why did that not work?
- How can I use these insights to improve the performance and impact of this and future projects?

It also warns you of pitfalls you might encounter on the journey, but also demonstrates that M&E can be invigorating, empowering and, above all, essential to learning and impact.

Box 3.1
What some of our users say

I am particularly interested in the use of information and communication technologies for development and in the course of my work have found the Toolkit to be extremely useful. I have used the website evaluation framework in the Toolkit to discuss clients' websites, in terms of what they would need to track and understand and also in helping them to structure their websites and their capacity for maintaining their website beyond the initial creation. Some clients have delayed their decision to have websites. I am aware that one youth group also decided to close their website and move to a Facebook group. I have also used the newsletter evaluation guidelines along with cost/benefit analysis to determine whether one of my organisations should do a newsletter. Recently, I have been involved in developing a course to train healthcare workers on child protection issues and am looking forward to applying the Kirkpatrick model as part of the evaluation of the training course. *Vidyaratha Kissoon, independent consultant in ICT for development and in social justice issues, primarily in the area of gender-based violence and promotion of equality, Guyana*.

The Toolkit has acted as an incredible atlas in my work. I use templates, principles, concepts and lessons in the Toolkit in almost every aspect of my work, particularly in media training – in evaluating the information and communication programmes, products and services we produce at the Secretariat of the South Pacific Community (SPC) Regional Media Centre. The Toolkit has become my self-assessment guide and tool. Increasingly, I find myself monitoring and evaluating my own perceptions and work experiences. Some of the questions that I ask myself with respect to my work in communication or media for development, or in communication or media training are: How can it be improved? How can it more effectively done? How can my programme and projects become sustainable?

The beauty of M&E is you get a front seat view of what is being done, who is doing what, when and where work activities are being carried out and just how cost-effective and timely the activities are with respect to the expected outcomes and overall goal.
Ruci Mafi, Regional Media Centre, SPC, Suva, Fiji

When I got hold of the Smart Toolkit during the sensitisation workshop I attended, I decided to read it. I found the Toolkit to be so useful. It promotes the use of methodologies for monitoring and evaluating information products and services in an effort to improve project management and I thought that it could also help us at the library to serve our client user information needs more effectively.

So, not only did I hold a sensitisation workshop on the Smart Toolkit to expose other colleagues to the Toolkit, I have also used the Toolkit to carry out M&E in my own work. I manage the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) research database which is the KNUSTSpace and the E-resources that the university library subscribes to. I found that through M&E I have been able to better respond to user needs and, as a consequence, seen a great improvement in the rate at which users effectively use the online resources.

Richard Bruce Lamptey, Institutional Repository Librarian KNUST Library, Kumasi, Ghana

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

The schematic diagram below acts as quick reference guide to the Toolkit. If you, as an enabler or doer, have certain questions you want answered, it would be useful to first consult Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1
The reference guide to using the Smart Toolkit

STRUCTURE OF THE SMART TOOLKIT

The Smart Toolkit comprises four parts.

Part 1 gives an overview of the evaluation of information projects, products and services within the **context of the project cycle and project management.** It stresses two central tenets of evaluation – stakeholder participation and learning – and provides an outline of what evaluation involves and how it links with monitoring and impact assessment.

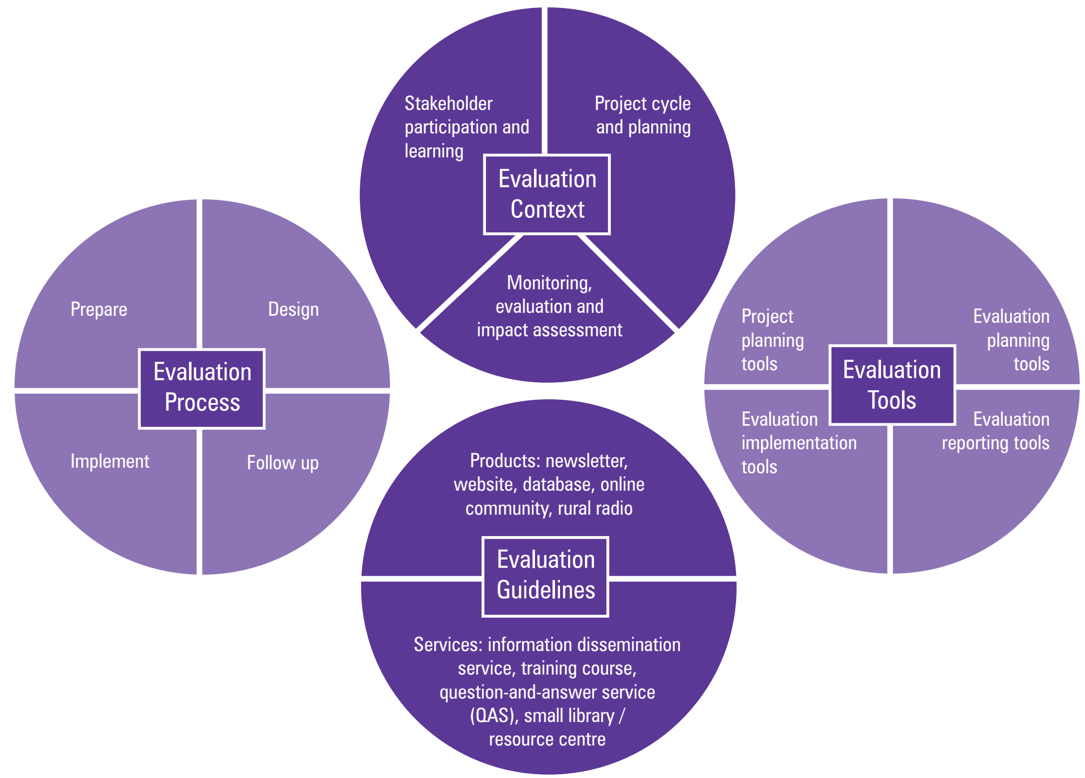
Part 2 explains the **evaluation process** as it relates to information projects, products and services. It describes how to prepare the terms of reference for an evaluation, covering such aspects as deciding its scope, methodology, data sources and work plan. It then discusses how to design and implement an evaluation and how to communicate the evaluation findings and translate them into action.

In **Part 3** a range of tools that can be used in all stages of the evaluation process are provided, from planning and implementing an information-related project to reporting and follow up.

Part 4 provides **evaluation guidelines** for nine information products and services:

- training course
- newsletter
- website
- question-and-answer service
- small library/resource centre
- online community
- rural radio
- database
- information dissemination service.

Figure 3.2
The Smart Toolkit – the context, process and tools of the evaluation, as an integrated whole, with information products and services



4

BACKGROUND TO MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) relate to the assessment of project planning and implementation. For some of our users, M&E offers information practitioners a way to learn and draw lessons from their information projects, products and services so that they can improve their management and determine how best to face future challenges.

Monitoring focuses mainly on the operational issues, whereas evaluation is often more concerned with the strategic issues and uses information generated by monitoring. Impact assessment is, in effect, the final part of evaluation, concerned mainly with looking for the changes in the lives of people as a result of a project or programme. Having a good monitoring system in place is, however, central to the success of any evaluation or impact assessment, as monitoring provides essential information which helps you to learn from your experiences during the implementation process.

Monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment processes have traditionally been seen mainly as a means of accounting to funding agencies for expenses on inputs and activities, and have frequently been carried out by an outside evaluator. The role of these processes in managing for impact is often neglected, and the information and insights they generate remain unused. Increasingly, however, it is being recognised that these processes can be used not only to meet funding requirements,

but also for self-assessment and learning and that they should include stakeholders, especially primary stakeholders – i.e. those who use the information products/services. This means doing things in a different way, with implications for planning, evaluation skills and budgets. Table 4.1 summarises this change in the approach to monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

If the ultimate goal of an evaluation is managing for impact – and it should be – then that evaluation needs to reflect a strong commitment to stakeholder participation and to learning. How to involve stakeholders, especially primary stakeholders, and how to achieve learning should be built into project management, from start to finish.

Table 4.1

Change in the approach to monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment

OLD APPROACH	NEW APPROACH
Monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment mainly for external funding body	Monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment for everybody involved in the project
Focused mainly on the logframe activities and on financial reporting	Provides feedback, generates learning and supports changes in direction
Lots of data and little analysis (lengthy reports)	Strong on analysis of how to make improvements
Little learning	Learning is key
Little stakeholder participation	Lots of stakeholder participation in decision-making and inclusion in the evaluation team
Seen as boring and not very useful for project staff or stakeholders	Seen as active, interesting and useful

Source: CTA/KIT/IICD (2009, p 3)

If the ultimate goal of an evaluation is managing for impact – and it should be – then that evaluation needs to reflect a strong commitment to stakeholder participation and to learning. How to involve stakeholders, especially primary stakeholders, and how to achieve learning should be built into project management, from start to finish.

5

EVALUATION CONTEXT

There are three major components that determine the context of an evaluation:

- stakeholder participation
- learning
- the place of evaluation in the project cycle and its relationship with planning, monitoring and impact assessment

STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

"Thin sticks are stronger when they are in a bundle." (African proverb)

Stakeholder participation is the active involvement of stakeholders in planning, management, monitoring and evaluation of a project. **Stakeholders** are individuals, groups or organisations who have a direct or indirect interest in a project, product or service, and/or are affected by its implementation and outcome. Examples of stakeholders include target groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community leaders, government institutions, companies and donor agencies. They may play roles as users of the information, information suppliers, producers, publishers, distributors, broadcasters or financiers. Often one stakeholder group may play more than one role in the information process.

Involving stakeholders in an evaluation process can help to improve the quality and impact of information projects, products and services by:

- helping to identify problems to be addressed and actions to be taken;
- enhancing their support for and involvement in the project, product or service;
- improving the quality of information collected;
- improving the quality of the data analysis;
- creating more interest in and understanding of the project, product or service.

Stakeholder participation is not just about informing stakeholders. It is also about making their participation meaningful, sharing of ideas, asking questions, consulting them from time to time, involving them in decision-making and even providing resources, such as labour or transport. Stakeholder participation is also very much about creating ownership of the project.

LEARNING

"Don't fear mistakes, there are none." (Miles Davis)

Learning is, or at least should be, a continuous process in the various phases in the development of an information project, product or service. Learning involves reflecting on project experiences and using the lessons learnt to improve future actions. It is important to make learning by all stakeholders a central element in planning, monitoring and evaluation. Using active, participatory, learning-oriented methods will encourage stakeholders to share their views and will help you to improve your information projects, products and services. All learning starts with practical experiences and reflecting upon these experiences, while identifying what is good and what could be improved. Based on this reflection we can develop alternative methods and concepts and decide what to put into practice. Practical experimentation closes the circle, which continues with a new phase of reflection. As all stakeholders will have different practical experiences, all these experiences and the reflection on them will have a different contribution to learning. Various ways to stimulate learning throughout a project include:

- involving stakeholders in all stages of the project and providing them with relevant and timely information throughout its planning and implementation;
- developing the capacity of stakeholders to contribute to all stages of the learning cycle;
- providing continuous learning opportunities (e.g., workshops, training, exchange visits);
- encouraging dialogue, openness, creativity and experimentation.

You also need to be aware of factors that could adversely affect learning in an organisation (see Box 5.1)

Box 5.1
Factors affecting the learning cycle

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE: In some organisations, accountability tends to be associated with blame. This discourages openness and learning. This culture should be changed, encouraging people to see that there is often as much to learn from poorly performing projects as there is from successful ones.

PRESSURE TO SPEND: Learning takes time, and the pressure to meet disbursement targets can lead to shortcuts being taken during the project planning stage, with lessons from previous experiences being ignored or only selectively applied, in haste.

LACK OF INCENTIVES TO LEARN: If accountability is not built into the project cycle, there will be little incentive to learn. This is particularly so when staff rotation or turnover is frequent, with people often having moved on long before the shortcomings of a project in which they were involved become evident.

LOSS OF INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY: This also stems from frequent staff rotation or turnover, as well as from a reliance on short-term consultants and the weakening or disbanding of specialist departments.

TUNNEL VISION: People, departments and organisations can get stuck in a rut, carrying on with familiar procedures and approaches even when their shortcomings are well known.

INSECURITY AND CHANGE: If people are unclear about an organisation's objectives, or these objectives appear to change frequently, this will not encourage learning.

INEQUALITY IN THE DONOR RELATIONSHIP: If donors take the driving seat, rather than working on an equal footing with the recipient organisation and sharing decision-making, this can inhibit the incentive to learn.

Adapted from OECD (2001, p 20-21)

THE PROJECT CYCLE

The project cycle is a useful tool to elaborate and reflect upon the different stages of a project or programme – especially if we consider a programme as a set of related projects. In the following paragraphs, we describe the different stages of the project cycle. At the hub of the cycle, and relating to each stage of the cycle, is learning.

Box 5.2
Differences between project and program

What is the difference between a project and a programme?

- **Project** is a one-off activity undertaken to create or deliver a product/service aimed at bringing about beneficial change or added value. It contrasts with processes or operations, which are permanent and seek to create or deliver the same product/service over and over again.
- **Programme** can consist of several projects and is therefore more complex and likely to be spread over a longer period of time. Collectively, these projects are usually intended to contribute to a higher level objective (e.g., improving the livelihoods of the programme beneficiaries).

The **terms 'information product' and ' information services'** usually mean project deliverables, such as training courses, newsletters, information databases and libraries. Unlike projects, which tend to have a beginning and an end, services are often continuous, with no declared end.

Source: CTA/KIT/IICD (2009, p 8)

Fig 5.1
Monitoring and evaluation in the project cycle

Adapted: CTA/KIT/IICD (2009, p 8)

REFLECTION AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING: This means formulating the broad objectives of the information project within the context of the organisation's vision, policies and needs, as identified in the field of agricultural information. Lessons learnt from previous programme evaluations and impact assessments should contribute to strategic positioning.

SITUATION ANALYSIS: Critically consider issues constraining effective agricultural information. These help to show us the gaps in the information flows between farmers, extension officers, information centres and researchers. It may also show the limited extent to which stakeholders actually know the effect and impact of agriculture-related information products and services.

Example: Smart Toolkit programme

The analysis that prompted the Smart Toolkit initiative was the recognition by information practitioners that they often found it difficult to demonstrate the effectiveness, relevance and impact of their work. This was due mainly to the limited availability of appropriate and cost-effective M&E tools and methods, and their limited knowledge and skills in M&E.

STRATEGIC PLANNING: At this stage, we should be working with key stakeholders to translate the major needs identified in the situation analysis into a strategic plan – formulating the major objectives and activities. Different objectives could form the basis for different projects. Information from earlier M&E activities is an important input into the strategic plan.

Example: Objectives of the Smart Toolkit programme

The Smart Toolkit programme has a long-term objective of promoting M&E practices in agricultural information services. This should lead to more effective provision and dissemination of information and, ultimately, increased agricultural productivity. Projects within the Smart Toolkit programme include the production, promotion and distribution of the Smart Toolkit (hard and soft copy), the organisation of training and sensitisation activities, the maintenance of a community website – www.smarttoolkit.net – and the production and distribution of an electronic newsletter, *Smart Toolkit News*.

OPERATIONAL PLANNING: This implies working out the details of specific objectives and activities and sorting out practical matters such as the budget, roles, responsibilities and time plans. At this stage, the M&E plan should be developed to include how and when to conduct the evaluation.

A project plan is a formal, approved document used to guide project implementation and management. It covers such elements as objectives (expected results), assumptions, activities, costs and timing. Project planning is the process of drawing up a project plan, and it is important to get it right. It should provide:

- a strategic outlook on how the project can make a difference – its outcome and impact;
- an operational outlook on how to implement and manage the project – its inputs, activities and outputs;
- a clear reference framework for strategic monitoring and evaluation.

Example: Structure of the Smart Toolkit project profile

For each project within CTA, including the projects within the Smart Toolkit, a project profile is developed which contains the background, context and problems to be addressed, goal, purpose and specific objectives, expected outputs/indicators, activities, inputs (resources needed and budget) and project duration.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION PLAN: Monitoring is concerned mainly with operational issues, whereas evaluation focuses on the more strategic questions. Monitoring is carried out on a continuous basis, whereas evaluation is a time-bound activity. It is important to develop an M&E plan before implementing a project. You need to be clear on which aspects of your information project, product or service you want to monitor and evaluate and the frequency of monitoring and evaluating them. For example, do you want to monitor your project, product or service daily, weekly, monthly, or at some other interval? Key issues you need to consider when developing an M&E plan include:

- the purpose and scope of M&E activities, in view of your project concept and objectives formulated in the strategic and operational plans;
- the key questions to be addressed at different intervals of the project;
- the major indicators that help to answer the key questions;
- how to collect and analyse the data, when and by whom;
- how to critically reflect upon the information collected and how to communicate and report results to the various stakeholders;
- how to involve stakeholders in the process.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION: After project planning and developing an M&E plan, project implementation is the next stage in the project cycle. It should be noted that an important part of project implementation is the implementation of M&E activities. Data collection, analysis and communication activities should be considered as an integral part of implementation. If treated separately, they often require much more time and resources.

Example: CTA Project Profile requirements

In an effort to better monitor and evaluate its projects, CTA's project profiles include detailed requirements for project approval, such as: expected outputs, outcomes, impact and sustainability and an M&E reporting schedule. This makes it easier for staff to know from the outset of the project which data should be registered and which M&E activities should be conducted. In the case of the Smart Toolkit projects, for example, important data, including distribution records of publications, are collected regularly, and not at a later stage when collection becomes more difficult.

MONITORING: Monitoring is a continuous process that helps you to know if the delivery of your information projects, products and services is going according to plan. Monitoring starts as soon as the project is being implemented and focuses on the project effectiveness and efficiency. Proper monitoring shows to what extent the project is achieving its objectives and to what extent it is using its resources efficiently. If your project is not going according to plan, you need to take additional measures to get it back on track. If that is not realistic, you need to review your project plan. It helps you to learn from your experiences during the implementation process and to take action where needed. The involvement of stakeholders is important for that learning process. Adequate monitoring also provides you with the necessary background information to help explain evaluation information, making an evaluation easier and more relevant.

Before conducting monitoring, you need to be clear about what aspects you want to monitor and how often to monitor them, otherwise you may collect too little information to be able to make useful decisions or you may collect too much information, resulting in a waste of time and resources. Monitoring can be conducted at the individual, project, organisational and stakeholder level. The major questions to be asked are similar: 'To what extent are activities being done and resources being used according to plan? What is going well and what should be improved?'

Example: Implementation of the electronic newsletter, *Smart Toolkit News*

If we take the electronic newsletter, *Smart Toolkit News*, as an example of a project, implementation implies selection and editing of articles, maintaining a subscribers' list and distributing the newsletter. It also includes maintaining statistics of articles and readers, which is fairly easily done. If these data are not collected during the implementation process, they will be difficult to collect at a later date.

EVALUATION: Whereas monitoring is concerned mainly with operational issues, evaluation focuses on the more strategic questions about the information projects, products and services, like the quality of the information products and services delivered and their utilisation by the users. It is a time-bound activity that gives you the tools to explain what happened, and how and why things happened as they did.

Evaluating information projects, products and services from a management and accountability perspective is fairly straightforward. Trying to determine their benefits, however, particularly in the medium to long term, is difficult. The picture becomes even more complex when ICTs are involved and with the increasing globalisation of information products and services.

External evaluations are conducted by organisations or independent evaluators outside the organisation which is implementing and managing the project. **Internal evaluations** are conducted by people within the organisation which is implementing and managing the project. A combination of both, with stakeholder participation, is usually best if effective learning and impact are to be achieved.

***Ex ante* evaluations** are **done at the beginning of the project planning stage.** The focus here is on assessing the project proposal in terms of relevance, feasibility, potential impact or expected benefits. They act like a second opinion on whether or not the project is viable.

Mid-way (or mid-term) evaluations are **done** during the project. The focus here is on looking at project progress and performance and identifying changes in the environment that affect its effectiveness. Sometimes a mid-way evaluation is conducted to explain an unusual event.

***Ex post* evaluations** are conducted at the end of the project cycle. The focus here is on reviewing the whole cycle within the context of its background, objectives, results, activities and inputs. The evaluation looks at how well the project did in terms of the expected outcomes, how sustainable these outcomes appear to be and what factors led to the results.

Example: Electronic newsletter *(Smart Toolkit News)* and areas of emphasis of different types of evaluation

If we consider the example of the *Smart Toolkit News*, the ***ex ante* evaluation** reveals to what extent potential readers are interested in the newsletter, what type of articles would be of interest to them and the time and costs involved in preparing and distributing the newsletter.

The **mid-term evaluation** shows whether or not readers are satisfied, which articles were useful and which type of articles should get more attention. Other issues include the type of readers reached by the newsletter and the possibilities to expand readership.

The ***ex post* evaluation** would be expected to provide information on the usefulness of the newsletter to the readers and the type of uses made. It would also be interesting to know to what extent the newsletter was an efficient way of providing information in comparison with other information methods.

In terms of the Smart Toolkit programme, the ***ex ante* evaluation** includes a needs assessment of information practitioners and the feasibility of developing, promoting and distributing the Smart Toolkit as a methodology.

The **mid-term evaluation** concerns the usefulness of the Smart Toolkit for its users and the effectiveness of the methods used to promote the toolkit and to sensitise and train information practitioners. For this purpose, an electronic user survey was conducted in October/November 2011.

An ***ex post* evaluation**, to be conducted towards the end of the Smart Toolkit programme, can be expected to look in more detail at the way information practitioners have been using the Smart Toolkit and to what extent it has contributed to improving their M&E activities.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT: This is essentially an evaluation that focuses primarily on the (long term) changes that have occurred in the lives of the target group as a result of a programme or project. Often it relates to a broader set of interventions, not just one project, product or service but a range of them. It involves looking at the expected changes, but also at the unexpected ones, both positive and negative. Impact assessment is usually done when a project or programme has been completed, or at least is well on its way towards completion. In the case of an information project or programme, an impact assessment will try to assess how the project or programme has actually influenced the activities of the target group, how it has helped, or not helped, and what have been the positive and negative side-effects. Answering these questions will generate a better understanding of success or failure.

Example: Assessing the impact of the Smart Toolkit programme

The impact of the Smart Toolkit programme is the extent to which information practitioners have been able to improve the management of information projects, products and services using the Smart Toolkit for improved M&E. The improvement of (agricultural) information projects, products and services could be demonstrated through increased satisfaction of users on the usefulness of the information project/product/service and whether it led to some real change in the activities of the target group.

Impact assessment can be time-consuming and complex. It requires not only good baseline data, but also a clear idea from the outset of the change the information project/product/service was intended to make.

Key points

1. Monitoring is a continuous learning process, involving stakeholders, that helps you to find out if the delivery of your (information) project, product or service is going according to plan.

2. Evaluation is a time-bound learning process for main stakeholders to find out what is satisfactory (and what not) about an (information) project, product or service and to identify areas of improvement.

3. Impact assessment is, in essence, an evaluation that focuses primarily on the changes a project, product or service brings about in the behaviour, lives and livelihoods of its stakeholders.

4. Continuous monitoring assists evaluation. Regular evaluations assist impact assessment, making the information required more readily available.

5. Stakeholder participation is key to making M&E a learning process. It helps to create understanding, ownership and commitment in making necessary changes in a project, product or service.

6. Making an M&E plan helps to keep and collect the right records at the right time and to arrange for adequate follow up of activities. It also supports adequate analysis of relevant data, drawing justified conclusions based on adequate communication with and involvement of stakeholders, for learning and improvement.

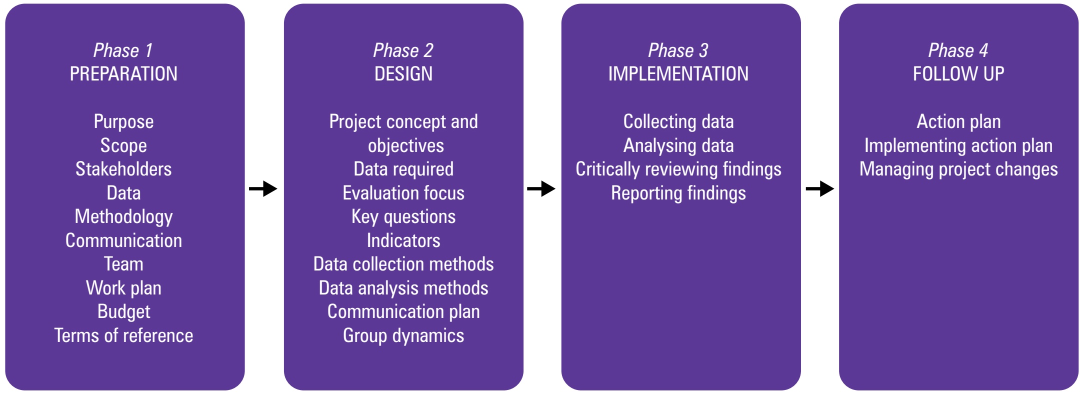
6 THE EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process can be grouped into four phases (see Figure 6.1):

- Phase 1 – Preparing the evaluation terms of reference (ToR)
- Phase 2 – Designing the evaluation
- Phase 3 – Implementing the evaluation
- Phase 4 – Following up the evaluation

However, you will find that in order to go from one stage to the next, you will need to revisit an earlier one to improve it. For example, in Phase 2, when designing your evaluation and in your discussions with stakeholders, you might find it necessary to go back to Phase 1 to refine the ToR so that they match your stakeholders' information needs more closely. Also, there is likely to be some overlap between the phases.

Fig 6.1
The evaluation process



PHASE 1: PREPARATION

The preparation phase of an evaluation consists of developing the ToR based on the **situation analysis.**

The **situation analysis** provides the background information to the evaluation, describing the present state of the information project, product or service in its context. The history, current activities of the stakeholders and an indication of the major problems and developments at hand are taken into consideration. Drawing a **rich picture** (see Box below) showing the stakeholders and their involvement in the project is often a good tool for analysing the context in which the project operates.

Box 6.1
Definition of a rich picture

Rich pictures were developed to gather information about complex situations. They are particularly useful in illustrating the richness and complexity of a situation in which an information project operates. They allow you to get an idea of all the influences, interactions and connections among various stakeholders, offering a way of making sure nothing important gets left out of your thinking.

Rich pictures involve using cartoon-like drawings to depict ideas, connections, relationships, influences, and cause-and-effect situations. They should also reflect subjective elements such as characteristics, points of view and prejudices. While working with your primary stakeholders you should try to draw these elements from them, rather than rely on your own interpretation of the situation. Rich pictures provide an excellent tool for group work, and are also a good way for a group to come to a broad, shared understanding of a situation.

Example: Situation analysis – electronic newsletter, *Smart Toolkit News*

Short description

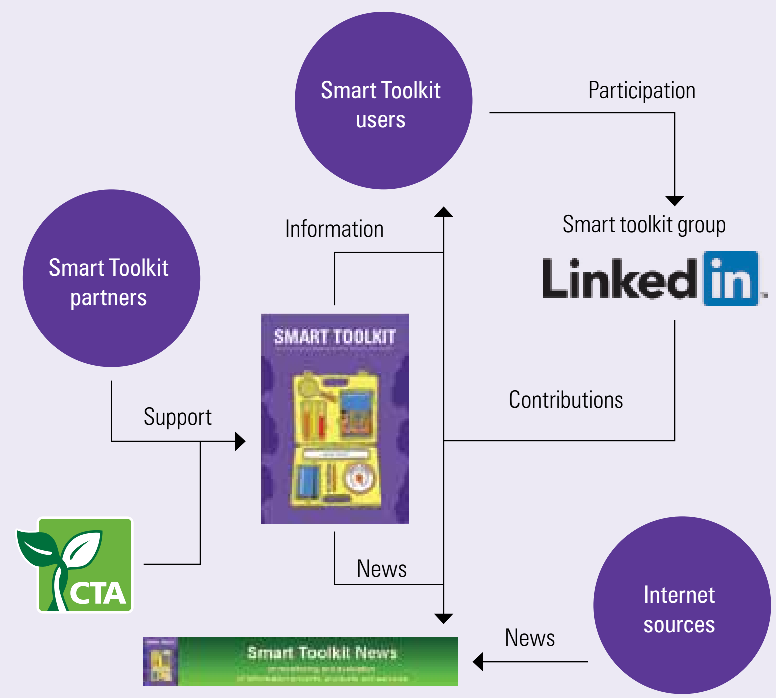
The *Smart Toolkit News* is a newsletter which is produced on a monthly basis. It contains news and information on M&E in general, with special attention given to information projects, products and services.

Background, target groups and needs

Two years ago, the newsletter was initiated in an effort to help Smart Toolkit users and other interested parties keep abreast of the latest developments in M&E. The number of subscribers has grown steadily, and now stands at 250. At the same time, the newsletter is being used as an instrument to build an active community around the application of the Smart Toolkit.

Rich picture of the *Smart Toolkit News* and its stakeholders

The Smart Toolkit team produces the *Smart Toolkit News*. Support to do this comes from CTA and its partners. Smart Toolkit users are the main target group. The newsletter content is based on developments relating to the Smart Toolkit project, the Smart Toolkit group on LinkedIn, which consists of various Smart Toolkit users, and other developments taking place elsewhere. Contributions by users to the newsletter are, to a large extent, limited.



The **ToR** enable the evaluation team and the stakeholders to see **what** is to be done, **who** should do it, **how** it should be done, **when** it should be done and with what **resources** available. Components of the **ToR** include:

1. The **purpose** of the evaluation – why is the evaluation being done?

2. The **scope** of the evaluation: this provides the boundaries – what it will cover and what it will not and the main assessment criteria to look into.

Box 6.2

Important and frequently used assessment criteria

Accessibility: The extent to which your project reaches the primary stakeholders (i.e. how easy it was for them to access the information product/service in terms of its availability, distribution and timeliness).

Impact: The positive and negative changes produced by your project, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended (i.e. the extent to which primary stakeholders have successfully used the product/service to improve their lives).

Relevance: The extent to which the product/service is suited to the priorities and needs of the primary stakeholders, and the priorities of other key stakeholders, the project managers and the donor (i.e. the extent to which the project was a good idea).

Sustainability: The extent to which your organisation will be able to continue to provide the product/service after the completion of the project. (i.e. the extent to which the primary stakeholders will continue to benefit from the product/service when project funding ends).

Usability: The extent to which the primary stakeholders are able to use your product/service. This depends on such factors as completeness of the product/service, accessible language (the language itself and its level and style), accessible images (diagrams, pictures, etc. relevant to the lives of the primary stakeholders), technically accurate information, and design relevant to the context in which it will be used.

Utility: The extent to which your project can be successfully replicated in another location or among different primary stakeholders. Utility also relates to lessons learnt from the project, and how they could be usefully applied to other projects.

Effectiveness: The extent to which your project has achieved its objectives (this is similar to impact, but whereas impact covers both intended and unintended changes, effectiveness is concerned with the intended objectives).

Efficiency: The cost-effectiveness of your project in terms of outputs – qualitative and quantitative – compared with inputs (i.e. has it used the least costly resources possible in order to achieve the desired results?).

Choosing which criteria to use in defining the scope of your evaluation will depend on:

- your organisation's policy and core values;
- the policies and interests of other major stakeholders, including your donors;
- the current state of your project and the key issues that you need to address;
- the level of stakeholder participation you envisage;
- the resources (time, money, people) you have.

3. **Who the stakeholders are** and how you can involve them. Stakeholders can provide information to the process, but are also part of the learning process involved. It is therefore important to find out and take into account what they would like to know from the evaluation.

4. What are the **existing data** and sources of data? These help make the process more efficient and effective.

5. What **methodology** will be used to collect and analyse the data? Data collection is not just making a questionnaire or doing interviews. Data analysis is more than putting percentages in a table. There are a variety of approaches, each having their own merits. Choose consciously! You often need more than one method of data collection and data analysis.

6. **Reviewing and reporting** evaluation findings. **Communication** is a key element in the learning process; it is not just compiling an evaluation report. From the outset, stakeholders should be involved in an interactive way (two-way communication). This is to ensure that stakeholders know what is going on and that the evaluation team is aware of the position, sentiments and feedback of the stakeholders. Critically reflecting with stakeholders on the information collected is also an important part of the process.

7. The **evaluation team**: the composition of the team should support the collection and analysis of data during the evaluation, and be able to support the implementation of lessons learnt. It means that you will need a combination of technical knowledge, communication skills and an adequate representation of stakeholders.

8. **Work plan and budget**: This should be realistic and in line with all other parts of the ToR. This ensures that each activity is considered and assigned a budget line.

Example: Terms of Reference for the evaluation of *Smart Toolkit News*

Background of the evaluation

The e-newsletter has been in operation for two years. The Smart Toolkit team would like to find out about the effectiveness of the newsletter and how readers can become more involved in contributing to it. The evaluation is initiated by the Smart Toolkit team and supported by CTA and its Smart Toolkit partners.

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to learn how to make the newsletter more effective in addressing the information needs of its readers. The evaluation should also generate information and ideas on how readers can become more involved in contributing their experiences to the newsletter.

Participation of stakeholders/partners

The evaluation will be conducted by the Smart Toolkit team, with support of CTA and its partners. The members of the Smart Toolkit LinkedIn group will be asked to provide feedback on the evaluation design and results.

What are the existing sources of information and where do you find them?

Existing sources of information include:

- the project profile;
- all editions of the Smart Toolkit News in 2010 and 2011;
- a recent survey carried by CTA among Smart Toolkit users;
- the Smart Toolkit website;
- discussions in the LinkedIn group.

Methodology: data collection and data analysis

The survey is expected to include the following data collection methods:

- a short electronic survey among readers of the news (using SurveyMonkey);
- discussions in the LinkedIn group;
- chat session with selected readers.

Team composition, roles and responsibilities

The evaluation team will consist of two members of the Smart Toolkit team, one CTA staff member and one selected subscriber to the Smart Toolkit News. The team will jointly be responsible for designing and implementing the evaluation.

Expected results: Critical reflection and reporting

The results of the evaluation will be discussed in the LinkedIn group and during the chat session with selected readers. This is expected to generate additional ideas and insights. A draft report will be presented to CTA and its partners. The final report will be published on the Smart Toolkit website, together with a post on the LinkedIn group and an article in the newsletter.

Work plan Activity	Days needed	March	April	June	July
Evaluation design	2 days	x			
Inviting feedback on evaluation design (CTA, partners, LinkedIn group)	1 day		x		
Administering electronic survey, including invitation and follow up	1 day		x		
Data analysis	1 day			x	
Chat session on survey results with selected readers	1 day			x	
Discussion on survey results with LinkedIn group`	1 day			x	
Draft report including feedback meeting	2 days			x	
Final report	1 day				x
Total	**10 days**				

PHASE 2: DESIGNING THE EVALUATION

Once the ToR have been agreed on and the budget approved, you can move on to designing the evaluation. It is important to remember that all decisions made in relation to the detailed planning will depend on resources, especially the skills and time available. It's no use choosing certain methods or tools if you don't have the required skills in the team, or no way of getting access to training,

1. Review the project concept and objectives

You can't evaluate a project, product or service if you do not know what it is about. You should study original documents and interview key stakeholders to find out: purpose, objectives and indicators of the project, product or service and the key issues related to different stakeholders, including the changes over time. Often, summarising the project plan into a logical framework, logic model or theory of change helps to create a better understanding of the intervention logic of the project.

Example: Review of the project concept and objectives applied to the *Smart Toolkit News*

Concept/vision

There is a need for information on cost-effective methods and techniques to monitor and evaluate information projects, products and services. Experiences and insights change over time. The very nature of Smart Toolkit content makes it a living document, which needs to be updated at regular intervals. The newsletter bridges the gaps between the Toolkit and current developments in M&E, by collecting news, articles and experiences from various sources and presenting them to its readers.

Objectives

To produce and distribute an electronic newsletter that contains useful articles on M&E and information on developments related to the Smart Toolkit.

Indicators for success

The newsletter should be produced at least 10 times per year.
The newsletter should reach at least 250 subscribers.
Each newsletter should contain at least 1 interesting article for each subscriber.

Activities

Selection of articles from various sources.
Writing articles on developments concerning the Smart Toolkit.
Promoting the newsletter among CTA stakeholders at selected meetings.
Maintaining a list of subscribers.

Project metaphor

Every information project, product or service is unique. To evaluate, you need the right tools at the right time.

Logical framework for the Smart Toolkit News

	Intervention logic	Indicators	Source of verification	Assumptions
Overall Objective	Improved monitoring and evaluation of information projects products and services	50% of the readers improve M&E practices	Readers	Readers are managing information projects, products or services
Project Purpose	To produce and distribute an electronic newsletter on M&E	10 issues per year, at least 10 articles per issue, to 250 readers	Newsletter archives	
Results	1. Subscribers list maintained	2. Articles collected and edited	3. Newsletter distributed	
Indicators	Subscribers' list updated before each edition	10 articles per issue	Newsletter distributed according to plan	
Activities	1.1 Adding new subscribers	2.1 Collecting and selecting articles from internet or readers	3.1 Check on content of the newsletter	Most relevant sources identified
	1.2 Removing invalid email addresses	2.2 Adding own articles	3.2 Sending the newsletter	
		2.3 Editing and ordering articles		

Major questions based on project concept and objectives:

- To what extent are subscribers involved in M&E?
- To what extent are the articles useful to them?
- Which type of articles do they need?
- How can we access all relevant sources?
- How can we stimulate readers to contribute?

2. Data needed to evaluate: Clarify the information needs of stakeholders

Just as stakeholder participation is key in an evaluation to facilitate learning, understanding and commitment, it is just as important to take time to critically reflect on the benefits of the information project, product or service to different stakeholders and how they can contribute to it, and the influence that they may exert on the information project, product or service. This helps to determine the way in which you can involve stakeholders in the evaluation process.

Table 6.1
Stakeholder analysis: *Smart Toolkit News*

Stakeholders	Benefits	Contributions/ sacrifices	Influence	Potential involvement in the evaluation
Readers	Information about M&E	Time	Through contributions and through their show of interest	As a source of information. Providing feedback on results (selected readers) Part of evaluation team (selected reader)
Members of the Smart Toolkit LinkedIn group	Practical ideas on how to deal with M&E	Time	Through their contributions	Providing feedback on design and results
Smart Toolkit team	Professional satisfaction	Time and energy	Selection of articles/ composition of the newsletter	Part of the evaluation team
CTA	Confirmation as respected information source on M&E	Costs	On the contents of the newsletter in general	Part of the evaluation team (staff member)
Smart Toolkit partners	Recognition as supporters of the Smart Toolkit project	Promotional support	On the general concept of the newsletter	Providing feedback on design and results

In addition, it is important to know what the main questions are that they would be interested in and how they would use the answers. This will help to determine the focus and key questions for the evaluation and at the same time ensure that all relevant major questions of stakeholders are addressed.

Table 6.2
Stakeholders and key questions:
Smart Toolkit News

	Main questions they are interested in	Potential use of the answers
Readers	What are the new developments and experiences related to M&E and information projects, products and services? What can I expect from the newsletter?	Use ideas in own M&E activities
Members of Smart Toolkit LinkedIn group	Who can answer my M&E questions in a practical way? Who can help me with his/her experiences?	To solve problems encountered, incorporate new ideas
Smart Toolkit Team	What type of articles to select for the newsletter? How to stimulate the contribution of readers?	Improved quality of the newsletter. Reduced time for making the newsletter
CTA	Does the newsletter help readers to improve their M&E?	Decision on whether to continue the newsletter and/ or change its concept
Smart Toolkit partners	Does the newsletter help readers to improve their M&E?	Decision on whether to continue and/or intensify support

3. Determining the evaluation focus, key questions and indicators

Every evaluation exercise has to be sharply focused because time, skills and budget are limited and it is not possible to cover all aspects in an evaluation. You need to focus on specific evaluation criteria to be able to get data to draw meaningful conclusions, especially given time and other resource constraints. Based on the focus, you can develop your key questions and related indicators that help to provide an answer to your question. Major questions that you cannot address in this evaluation can be addressed in a next one.

Example: Focus, key questions and indicators of the evaluation of *Smart Toolkit News*

If we look at the major questions of stakeholders, we can see that the key criteria for the evaluation should include effectiveness and impact. We could call this the scope of the evaluation.

Table 6.3
Focus, key questions and indicators of the evaluation of *Smart Toolkit News*

Scope Key elements/ criteria	Focus`	Key questions	Indicators	Interest among stakeholders	Accessibility of relevant data
Impact (change)	Improvements in M&E	To what extent does the newsletter help readers to improve their M&E?	Percentage of readers that indicate specific M&E improvements based on newsletter articles	High	Medium
Effectiveness (quantity and quality of the service)	Volume of readers and reading of articles	How many actual readers does the newsletter have? How many articles are actually read? What types of articles are most interesting? What is the potential growth of readership?	Number of subscribers.	High	High
			Percentage of subscribers that actually read the newsletter.	High	High
			Number of articles that a subscriber reads on average.	High	High
			Type of articles that subscribers prefer or do not prefer.	High	High
			Other information practitioners that may be interested in the newsletter	High	Medium

4. Designing the data collection

Evaluations can fail because too little or too much data are collected without the right questions being asked. It is therefore important to prepare properly for the data collection so that:

- the data you need are available during the evaluation;
- you collect data that will answer your key questions;
- you do not collect too much data that you do not need.

In designing the data collection you will have to ask yourself:

- what tool will I use?
- from which information source?
- which questions should that answer?
- through which indicator(s)?

Table 6.4
Data collection design for the *Smart Toolkit News*

Data collection method	Source of information	Major questions to include	Comments and concerns
Desk study	Newsletter archives and statistics	What types of articles are included in the newsletter? What is the number of subscribers? Which articles are most frequently read?	
Electronic survey	Subscribers	User profile (organisation, position, age, gender) How often do you read the newsletter? How many articles do you read fully (click through)? What types of articles do you prefer? What types of articles are not interesting to you? How useful is the newsletter to you? To what extent are you involved in information projects, products or services? To what extent are you involved in M&E? Did any of the articles influence you to improve your M&E? Do you have any experiences that are willing to share?	Only the most active/ interested subscribers may react
Online discussion	LinkedIn group	What are the most interesting types of articles in the newsletter? What are the issues that readers are interested in? What are interesting sources of M&E information? How can readers be stimulated to contribute/What hinders readers from contributing?	The LinkedIn group may not be representative of all readers
Chat discussion	Selected readers	What are main M&E issues that readers struggle with? What are interesting M&E sources? What hinders readers to contribute experiences? How can they be stimulated?	The subscribers willing and able to participate in the chat session may not be representative of all readers

5. Data analysis design

Data collected have to be analysed. You should therefore think about how to analyse data before collecting them. This will help to ensure that you collect the right data and do not overlook anything that you need. In your data analysis design you will have to ask yourself:

- what analytical tool should I use?
- which data collection method should I use?
- what type of observations do I expect to make from the analytical tool?
- what type of conclusions do I expect to draw?

Table 6.5
Data analysis design – *Smart Toolkit News*

Analytical tool or table	Results on data collection method to use	Type of observations to make	Type of conclusions (recommendations) to reach
Newsletter profile	Desk study	Type of articles included	Over- or under-representation of some types of articles
Table: User profile	Electronic survey	Type of readers	Potential reader groups to give more focus
Table: Usefulness of articles	Electronic survey	Interest of readers in articles	Improved selection rules of articles
User interaction	LinkedIn group and chat session	How to stimulate users to contribute	New activities
SWOT analysis	LinkedIn group and chat session	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for the newsletter	New strategies

6. Designing the communication plan

The communication strategy for critically reviewing and reporting findings was formulated in Phase 1. Now it is time to develop a more detailed communication plan. Preparing an effective mix of communication methods is an important factor in ensuring a common understanding and commitment among stakeholders. These methods include workshops, meetings, articles and reports. The communication plan is also likely to influence your data collection and analysis activities. Initially, you need to answer the question: 'What do you want to achieve through the critical review and reporting processes?'

It is important to note that there will always be differences in access and preferences. The main questions in developing a communication plan include:

- which communication method to use?
- for which group of stakeholders?
- which issues to address and which messages to include?

Table 6.6
Communication plan for critically reviewing and reporting findings – *Smart Toolkit News*

Method	Stakeholders involved	Major contents to address	What elements not to address
Chat session	Selected users	Results from electronic survey. User interaction	Personal issues
LinkedIn group	Group members	Results from electronic survey and chat session	Personal issues
Draft report and feedback meeting	CTA and partners	Draft report, including conclusions and recommendations	
Final report	CTA and partners LinkedIn group Readers	Background, methodology Findings, conclusions and recommendations	Personal issues
Report summary	Other interested parties (website)	Summary findings, conclusions and recommendations.	Personal issues

Key points in designing the evaluation

- Focus on key issues. You cannot focus on everything as time and budget are always limited.
- Involve stakeholders in the design to improve quality and commitment and to enhance learning.
- Design data collection, analysis and reporting, before implementing the evaluation. This helps you to do the right things at the right time and avoid unnecessary activities or miss out on essential information.
- Ensure that you make a clear link between your scope, focus, key questions and indicators, data collection design, data analysis design and your communication plan. This means keeping track of your ToR.
- Ensure that you create enough time for data analysis, critical reflection and reporting. The time needed is often underestimated.

PHASE 3: IMPLEMENTING THE EVALUATION

Having prepared the evaluation ToR and designed the evaluation process, the evaluation should now be implemented. If you have given enough attention to the design, implementation will be much easier. The main steps in the implementation process are:

- collecting the data;
- analysing the data;
- critically reviewing and reporting the findings.

1. Collecting the data

In collecting the data, you will not only need to think about the design of your data collection tool(s). You will also need to:

- test it to ensure that it is valid, and will give the expected kind of results;
- train your data collectors (interviewers, group moderators);
- identify and motivate your respondents;
- organise the logistics.

2. Analysing the data

In analysing data you have to consider the two approaches: quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. Given the subjective nature of qualitative analysis, you will have to think of a way of including stakeholders in the process to give more weight to your analysis.

The results from both approaches will need to be verified and this can be done by, for example, comparing data from one method with that of another or with earlier surveys. You could also discuss the findings with your stakeholders.

3. Critically reviewing and reporting the findings

In your communication plan (Phase 2), you will already have identified the communication methods/events to be organised. For each event, it will be important to reflect upon:

- which questions and assumptions from the findings to address;
- what the outcome of the event should be (e.g. a joint decision or statement, a piece of advice, or a list of suggestions);
- who the participants will be – which stakeholders to include, with what roles;
- programme content;
- which logistical questions to address.

Key points in implementing the evaluation

- Pre-test your methods. Questions and reports are often unclear and ambiguous.
- Be flexible: change your approach if it appears to be inadequate, but ensure that you can compare results from different settings.
- Keep your ToR in mind.
- Be aware of bias.
- Be aware of the different consequences of recommendations for different stakeholders.
- Focus on learning rather than judging.
- Focus on action rather than words.

PHASE 4: FOLLOW UP THE EVALUATION

1. Formulating an action plan

The action plan is the translation of the findings into action. It therefore requires agreement among major stakeholders; it also needs to be manageable in the sense that sufficient financial resources, skills and time are available for the action to be implemented. Actions need to be formulated as specific activities with a proper timeframe and someone needs to be responsible for their implementation.

2. Monitoring the implementation

Actions from evaluations are meant to actually improve the performance of the project, product or service that is being evaluated. In monitoring, it will be important to see:

- whether or not the action agreed upon was actually implemented;
- whether or not the action was followed by the expected result (the improvement).

3. Managing change

Trying to improve a project, product or service means change. Change means that (some) stakeholders may need to adapt their behaviour. Useful questions to see to what extent stakeholders are ready for change include the following:

- are they **aware** of why the change is needed?
- do they have the **desire** to support and participate in the change?
- do they have the **knowledge** of how to change?
- do they have the **ability** to implement the change?
- is there any mechanism to **reinforce** and keep the change in place?

7 CONCLUSION

"It always seems impossible until it's done." (Nelson Mandela)

In the past, many managers and practitioners found it difficult to identify M&E methods and tools that organisations could use specifically and successfully with information related projects. Unquestionably, the Toolkit has played a key role in filling this gap; if you are an enabler or doer, you too can contribute to the body of knowledge through the sharing of experiences. You can do this by joining our Smart Toolkit community. We also recommend you visit our website at http://www.smarttoolkit.net/ for more information on the Smart Toolkit project and how you can share your experiences. The Smart Toolkit group on LinkedIn also provides a platform where you can discuss your specific issues or concerns, see 'Useful platforms and websites' for the link, or visit our website.

Below are key points that you should keep in mind when undertaking any evaluation of information projects, products and services.

Find your own way

Just as there are many roads to Rome, there are also various ways to go about an evaluation. What we have presented in this document is a logical method presented in a step by step way. Organisations and their information projects, products and services tend to vary widely. We would therefore encourage you to use whatever approach fits your situation best, mould it to your needs and leave out whatever does not seem to fit. It is also useful to read other approaches so you can get an idea of how you can better tailor-make your own evaluation.

Take time

"You will never "find" time for anything. If you want time, you must make it." (Charles Bruxton).

M&E does not happen by itself: it requires time and energy. However, developing an M&E framework and involving staff will help create awareness of the importance of M&E for the performance of the organisation, making it easier to devote time and energy to it.

Use what is already there

It does not make sense to re-invent the wheel. You are probably already doing some form of M&E, whether it is on a formal or informal basis. Most of the time, valuable information is already being collected and colleagues are sharing experiences to a certain extent. Learn from them.

Start small, go step by step

Do not be too ambitious at the outset. If you go step by step, involving your colleagues, you can expect to get their support as well as improved results for your information projects, products and services.

Involve stakeholders and emphasise learning

Any information project, product or service is the result of a joint effort on the part of all stakeholders. Effective M&E is therefore a joint learning activity of these stakeholders. Organising M&E is all about involving stakeholders and facilitating learning, not only within the organisation, but also among external stakeholders. It is a joint effort on how to make information projects, products and services better. It is not about finding faults and punishing the culprit.

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Useful platforms and websites

The Smart Toolkit website: http://www.smarttoolkit.net/

The Smart Toolkit group on LinkedIn: http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=4095555&trk=anet _ ug _ hm

Monitoring and Evaluation NEWS: http://mande.co.uk/

Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation, Participatory Planning Monitoring and Evaluation: Managing for Impact portal: http://www.managingforimpact.org/

Recommended resources

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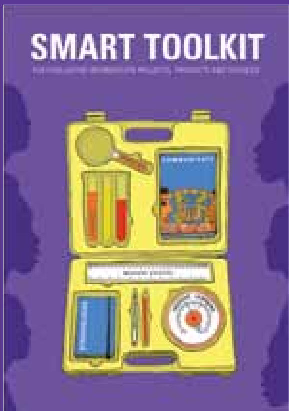
Acronyms and abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States
CTA	Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation
CSIR	Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (Ghana)
EU	European Union
ICKM	information, communication and knowledge management
ICM	information and communication management
ICT	information and communication technology
IICD	International Institute for Communication and Development
INSTI	Institute for Scientific and Technological Information (Ghana)
KIT	Royal Tropical Institute (The Netherlands)
KM	knowledge management
KNUST	Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
ONASA	Office National d'Appui à la Sécurité Alimentaire (The National Food Security Office) (Benin)
SMART	specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound
SPC	Secretariat of the Pacific Community
SWOT	strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
ToR	terms of reference



This book follows on the success of the *Smart Toolkit for Evaluating Information Projects, Products and Services* and serves as a compact primer aimed at policy- and decision-makers.

It is also a useful tool for managers of information projects, products and services, as well as M&E practitioners. It provides a short overview of the Smart Toolkit and acts as a quick reference for users.

For more about evaluating information projects, products and services, visit www.smarttoolkit.net.

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